

So you want to be... an obstetrician

Introduction

The most fascinating, versatile and challenging of all specialities – that's obstetrics and gynaecology. It takes you from conception to the cradle and even to the grave. This unique specialty encompasses embryo research, fertility treatment, miscarriage, childbirth, laparoscopy, oncology, palliative care, endocrinology, infectious diseases and family planning.

A dual role

In obstetrics you have not one but two patients, one only accessible through the other. The fetus has been made tangible with the advent of ultrasonography and fetal therapy. Maternal rights and fetal interests can lead to difficult ethical dilemmas that face obstetricians everyday. Childbirth and the safe delivery of a new mother and baby are amazing life events for the family and obstetricians are privileged to take part in these events.

Pre-pregnancy counselling is a growing part of obstetrics as more and more women with medical problems are getting pregnant. It is essential to prepare the woman and optimize her health in order to ensure the best pregnancy outcome. The growing tide of type 2 diabetes, maternal cardiac problems and epilepsy are but a few of the problems that require planning and pre-pregnancy counselling.

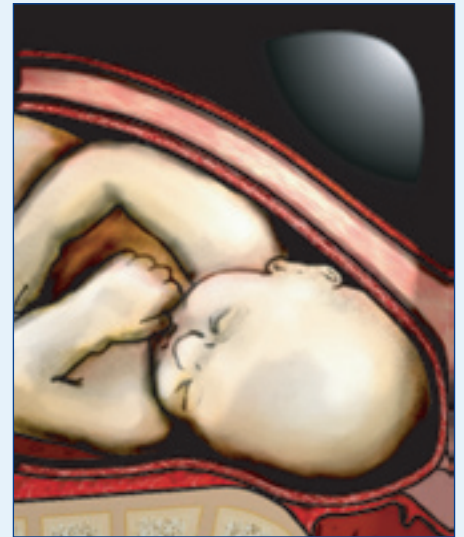
Once the woman is pregnant the obstetrician is then faced with numerous repeated risk assessments in the pregnancy. Antenatal care is designed to screen for the most common obstetric conditions. Additionally all obstetricians will look after high risk women, attempting to make their pregnancies and deliveries as safe as possible for the mother and babies. Management of the deliveries is immensely satisfying, exciting and can be adrenaline-inducing. Obstetrics is a wonderful mix of medicine and surgery.

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The career path for obstetrics

The advent of the foundation years means that some doctors will have had a 'taster' module of women's health. Entry into the specialty will be through competition into the Specialist Training Year 1 (ST1) and progression through a further 6 years to achieve the Certificate of Completion of Training. The first 5 years are core training and then trainees can choose one of the many subspecialties. Presently you can subspecialize in foetal-maternal medicine, gynaecological oncology, urogynaecology, infertility and community gynaecology. Maternal medicine is a rapidly growing, evolving field and is attracting both budding physicians and obstetricians. At the moment as a specialty we are on a recruitment drive to meet the government targets of a consultant-led service.

The hours in training have considerably improved since the European Working Time Directive. However, the payback is that it takes longer to accumulate experience. There are a large number of trainees who wish to work flexibly and this family-friendly specialty supports this, including at consultant level. I have trained flexibly since my fourth year as a specialist registrar. I am now in a locum consultant post with 7 programmed activities. This enables me to have a good deal of versatility and an ideal work-life balance in a very supportive working environment.



Conclusions

On a personal level, a career in obstetrics and gynaecology has been extremely rewarding even if the training has required endurance, both physical and emotional. At all levels of your career you need to be resilient, persistent and flexible. There are many good days but the ability to cope with the bad days is vital. At a senior level, teaching and training is an integral and challenging component.

As the face of medical education is changing, obstetrics needs to be taught and competencies appraised in many different ways. Watching a trainee gain experience and confidence on a labour ward is hugely satisfying and allows for mentorship. Obstetrics has an enormous amount to offer as a career but its diversity is unique among medical specialties. That is the beauty of this specialty – no one day at work is the same as the next. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

KEY POINTS

- Obstetrics and gynaecology is a versatile, challenging and diverse specialty with something to suit all tastes.
- It is unique in that you have not one but two patients, one only accessible through the other.
- It is a family-friendly specialty that supports flexible training.